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ABSTRACT

This study explored the model of feminist frameworks offered by Jagger and Struhl (1978) in the women's sport setting. The framework offers a classification of models of feminism (Liberalism, Marxism, Radicalism, and Socialism) describing the forms of women's oppression and offers a solution for eliminating such oppression. The Jaggen and Struhl's frameworks were used to explore the effect of sport in women's lives. Eight women athletes currently involved in basketball, softball, tennis, and volleyball took part in an interview process and discussed concepts relevant to each feminist framework. Results include discussion of (1) roots of oppression; (2) race as an issue of oppression in sport competition; (3) the need for the omission of social classes in sport; (4) arguments against compulsory heterosexuality; and (5) the need for society to recognize individual freedom of women in sport. The study concluded that the approach used offers an effective means to study the woman athlete and her ideas, concepts, and beliefs regarding feminism and the current status of women's participation in sport. The feminist frameworks presented indicated diverse explanations for oppressive factors in society. (Author/CB)

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The Woman Athlete and Alternative Approaches to Explaining Sport Participation

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ABSTRACT

THE WOMAN ATHLETE AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO EXPLAINING SPORT PARTICIPATION

The purpose of this study was to explore the model of feminist frameworks offered by Jagger and Struhl (1978) in the women's sport setting. This framework offers a classification of models of feminism (Liberalism, Marxism, Radicalism and Socialism) describing the forms of women's oppression and offers a solution for eliminating such oppression. The investigation employs Jagger and Struhl's frameworks to explore the effect of sport in women's lives. Eight women athletes currently involved in the sports of basketball, softball, tennis and volleyball took part in an interview process and discussed concepts relevant to each feminist framework. Results of this study include personal accounts and interpretations of the status of each of the women in their respective sport and their personal beliefs regarding the alternative feminist frameworks offered by Jagger and Struhl. Results include discussions of 1) roots of oppression, 2) race as an issue of oppression in sport competition, 3) the need for the omission of social classes in sport, 4) arguments against compulsory heterosexuality, and 5) the need for society to recognize individual freedom of women in sport.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals are unique and have different orientations toward sport. The woman's orientation toward sport is different from the male counterpart and in many cases necessitates more definition and explanation. The concept of feminism raises numerous questions as to who woman is and gives us more insights into the possibilities of beliefs available to women and women in sport.

The models of feminism as defined by Jagger and Struhl (1978), (Figure 1), offer an approach to exploring the present status of women in sport. The model a) explains the various models of feminism, b) gives a description of women's oppression, and c) offers a solution for eliminating women's oppression.

Making application of these models in the sport setting attempts to further explain the issues involved in women's sport and allows women athletes to explore their own beliefs regarding these issues.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore the model of feminist frameworks offered by Jaggar and Struhl (1978) in the women's sport setting. Specifically, the study addresses A) the roots of women's oppression: B) race as an issue of oppression in sport: C) the need for the omission of social classes in sport: D) arguments against compulsive heterosexuality: and E) the need for society to recognize individual freedom for women in sport.

METHOD

Eight women collegiate athletes currently involved in the sports of basketball, softball, tennis, and volleyball took part in the study. The group was comprised of four black and four white women athletes. Each athlete was requested to read a short account of the feminist frameworks described by Jaggar and Struhl (1978). The subjects then took part in an interview process and discussed concepts relevant to the feminist frameworks.

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Ethical procedures for research with human subjects were explicitly followed.

FIGURE 1

ALTERNATIVE FEMINIST FRAMEWORKS
Adapted from Jaggar and Struhl (1978, pp. XII; 82-85)

FRAMEWORK	ROOTS OF OPPRESSION	SOLUTION(S)
Liberalism	Lack of equal civil rights and educational opportunities	Elimination of discrimination based on sex
Marxism	Systems of social organization that produce unequal classes: property and profit reside in the ruling class	Socialist revolution resulting in the property of society as a whole
Radicalism	A. Women's childbearing functions B. Compulsory heterosexuality	Technological advances/ over means of reproduction Lesbianism as a personal and political preference
Socialism	Patriarchal forms of culture/ social organization and economic class oppression	Elimination of both class society and the institution of gender

RESULTS

The results of this study include personal accounts and interpretations of the women athletes in their respective sport and their personal beliefs regarding the concept of feminism and the alternative feminist frameworks offered by Jagger and Struhl.

Four of the subjects considered themselves to be liberal feminists. Two women classified themselves as radical feminists, and two indicated they believed in the tennents of both liberal and radical feminism.

INTERPRETATION OF FEMINISM

"Feminism isn't a radical or deviant concept. It denotes specifically support for women's causes and opportunities for both men and women."

"It is the belief in equal opportunities for women or the equal rights amendment. It is equal access to professional and personal opportunities and equal reward for success in a chosen career."

"Feminism is the freedom from the social restraints placed on women in all facets of life (social, political, sexual, emotional)."

"Feminism is a belief held by women of all ages that women should be free from a sexist society and have the freedom to choose their own lifestyle and have the same opportunities afforded men."

"Feminism takes on different meanings in sport and daily life. In sport, I'm free to be me. In daily life, as a believer in feminism, I am looked upon as someone who is different, unless I am with other women who believe in women as achievers."

"These frameworks sum up many of my feelings about myself and how I feel about society and feminism. My beliefs cross several of the classifications and each tennent means something to me in both my sport and daily life. They tend to define who I am in these different situations."

ROOTS OF OPPRESSION

The roots of oppression for women according to the athletes in this study were described as being A) society in general (i.e. men and women) for perpetuating the girl/woman as weak and incapable; B) men in particiular leadership roles; C) a biologically determined life; D) lack of support at the professional level of sport for most women; E) lack of support from the college/university for the women's sports program; and F) illogical myths regarding women in sport. Three athletes reported that they have not experienced any oppression in their sport programs at the college/university level.

"What is sad about our society regarding the issue of women is that some women don't even know they're oppressed and really couldn't care."

"My sport gives me freedom, not oppression. Parts of society oppress me, because they don't understand why women want to compete in sport rather than staying home having babies and taking care of a husband and a house. That may come later for me."

"When I'm competing in my sport, I can more easily be me; otherwise, others are always requiring that I behave and dress in a particular way."

"Our sports programs are not as oppressed today as they were in 1960's and 1970's for women. We have a lot more benefits now than the players of those times. We're fortunate that we have the scholarships, and for the most part, acceptance."

RACE AS AN ISSUE OF OPPRESSION IN SPORT

All of the subjects agreed that race was not an issue of oppression in women's sport.

"Race may be more of an issue in men's sports due to the overabundance of media coverage they receive in comparison to women's teams."

"We're friends with our teammates on and off the court. Maybe that's unusual, but then we have an unusually close team."

"The issue of stacking just doesn't apply to us. We all play together and for each other."

"Race has been more of an issue in our confrontations with other teams, but not among ourselves."

"We all have so much respect for one another that we actually don't note differences between us. Our coach has had a lot to do with our attitudes regarding how we view each other. She has done a lot to ensure that we get along. Sure we get on each other once in awhile, but there is so much love and acceptance among us that race is never an issue."

THE NEED FOR THE OMISSION OF SOCIAL CLASSES IN SPORT

The athletes noted that social class distinction was evident in their sport but that it was not a factor which interfered with their ability to interact and get along with each other.

"Of course we're aware that we are all from different social class backgrounds, but that is what makes us unique. If I was from a lower class background, I wouldn't have had the exposure at such an early age to my sport and wouldn't have developed my skills."

"Our social class backgrounds don't interfere with us getting along with each other. In fact, if anything, it enables us to share more with each other."

"One of the frameworks calls for the elimination of social classes, but that would take from our opportunities to understand each other. Social class differences aren't a problem in sport as much as some other things."

"In sport, we're all one social class, together. We're women who participate in sport. That in and of itself is a social class, a special class of women."

"If we eliminate our social classes we would all be the same and that would make for a very boring team make-up, no differences."

"Sport isn't real life. On the court, we're all the same, one class. In real life we're different, from different classes. And we all pull together for the same goal in sport. I don't think that interferes with what we're doing at all."

ARGUMENTS AGAINST COMPULSIVE HETEROSEXUALITY

All of the athletes felt individual freedom and rights for lifestyle should be honored by not only teammates, but by society. Some of the women expressed a concern that this one factor alone affected how society in general viewed the women who compete in sport.

"Women are constantly being judged and especially in the sport setting where all of a sudden everyone is concerned about sexuality and lifestyles. This is never an issue with men's sports. What difference does it make if someone wishes not to follow a heterosexual role?

"Why should I try to be something I'm not? Society is always so concerned about the homosexual woman in sport? I'm me and if society doesn't want to see me play ball, then they don't have to. But neither should they attempt to change who I am, by forcing me into a role and lifestyle I don't want."

"I can't stand it when commentators mention what I'm wearing on the court. That's not sport commentating, that's sexist language and to me a plea to be sure heterosexuality is in the forefront. They're so obvious in these statements. I wonder if they ever really listen to what they're saying?"

"Radical feminists argue against compulsive heterosexuality. I believe some of what they're saying, but not all. But I don't want to have to deal with the homosexual/heterosexual issue every time I step onto the court. Why can't individuals just choose and be left alone?"

THE NEED FOR SOCIETY TO RECOGNIZE INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN SPORT

The athletes indicated that individual freedom in their sport was especially important to each of them. The team sport athletes indicated that individual freedom was important, but not to the extent that it interferes with the team's play. All agreed that society needed to accept and acknowledge the woman athlete's right to individual freedom.

"Society is more accepting now of women participating in all forms of sport, but may still not be accepting of an individual athlete's movement pattern, especially if she is masculine. Teammates are much more accepting of individuals on the team."

"The oppressed woman especially needs to be allowed individual freedom in sport. Freedom is necessary to grow as an individual especially if you are the only radical on the team. There has to be some outlet."

"I have the right to develop my body and use it any way I see fit. I express myself on the court and my style is accepted by my teammates and the crowd: they allow me to be who I am."

"So much is expected of us; our intensity of play, being a role model, sportmanship...we hardly have time to be ourselves and express any individual freedom. Society expects a lot in these regards. Maybe the spectators need to give us some consideration when it comes to our own selves and our individual development as human beings. The expectation is for us to be superhuman and make no mistakes."

CONCLUSION

The approach used in this study offers only one avenue to study the woman athlete and her ideas, concepts and beliefs regarding feminism and the current status of her participation in sport. The interview procedures, short readings and discussion afforded each athlete the opportunity to verbalize her feelings regarding issues which are not frequently nor readily discussed.

Each athlete expressed a sincere interest in discussing the issues and was pleased with the opportunity to express her feelings regarding complex and controversial topics.

The feminist frameworks presented indicate diverse explanations to oppressive factors in our society. Every individual does not fit conveniently into each specific category, but rather has beliefs which may relate to each of the individual feminist models. Change in our society regarding the issues discussed may be slow in coming, but are worthy of study to better understand the woman's roles in society and the potential of future feminist perspectives.

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